



SOCDOC

MFA
SOCIAL
DOCUMENTARY
FILM

TENTH ANNUAL THESIS SHOWCASE

APRIL 1 – 4, 2021 • ALL ONLINE!
galleries.sva.edu/socdocshowcase10



2020 and 2021 have been years of remarkable change in our global landscape. Lives have been forever altered, and the entire world has been affected with more than two million lives lost to the pandemic. The change in how we live and communicate will reverberate for generations to come. For documentary filmmakers, to live through such a time of transition, with dramatic shifts in culture and behavior, in and of itself, is interesting. It has completely altered the way we see the world around us and how we tell stories—our own stories and, importantly, the stories of others.

Documentary film is one of the crafts through which artists can find ways to express themselves and find their own voice and vision while remaining truthful and responsible to what is unfolding before

them. In this volatile time, we are proud to foster a diverse set of filmmakers whose unique perspectives are needed, wanted and accepted. The platforms available for documentaries are growing exponentially. From long-form series to feature documentaries to documentary shorts, the audience is hungry and present in large numbers, flocking to the landscape of real life.

This year, our students are sharing work from Group Ten. They began their films before the pandemic reached our shores, and finished and edited them in this newfound isolation. The diverse films range from young sisters in a cloistered convent to a one-horse Western town reenacting its storied past, from a brilliant professor and the indecipherable language on an ancient stone to the inexplicable

loss for words when losing one's mother, from domestic violence and abuse in Russia to a traditional handloom artist in India weaving a story of hope and aspiration in a world where he is deemed "untouchable." All of this work is stunning, informative and emotionally resonant.

Many thanks, as always, to the SVA SocDoc faculty and staff, President David Rhodes, Executive Vice President Anthony Rhodes and Provost Christopher Cyphers.

Maro Chermayeff
—**Maro Chermayeff**,
Department Founder and Chair

★ Thesis Showcase Spotlight

Selected filmmakers have the opportunity to share their films with a group of documentary industry advisors who can potentially help further their projects—and careers. The filmmakers will also receive career strategy consultations from the industry advisors.

All graduates receive a membership in the **International Documentary Association** and a fee waiver for the 2021 **DOC NYC Film Festival**; Showcase Spotlight filmmakers obtain a membership to **The Gotham Film & Media Institute**.

★ Showcase Industry Advisors

Dana Merwin, Program Officer, Enterprise Fund, International Documentary Association

Sara Rodriguez, Senior Vice President for Documentary, HBO

Charlotte Reekers, Senior Program Manager, Documentary, The Gotham Film & Media Institute

Milton Tabbot, Senior Director of Programming, The Gotham Film & Media Institute

Donald Young, Director of Programs, Center for Asian American Media

TENTH ANNUAL THESIS SHOWCASE

Thesis Showcase is a preview of the films of our 2020 graduates. All films shown are works-in-progress and are looking ahead to festival premieres. Please be in touch with the department to track the films as they evolve.

FILMMAKER Q&As

Filmmakers, SocDoc faculty and special guests will be in conversation about their films throughout the weekend. See our website for links to each event, which are open to the public.

Thursday, April 1, 7pm ET

A Well Curated Life, DIRECTOR: **Jamie Deradorian-Delia**
The Last Cut, DIRECTOR: **Ben Wang**
Tie Up, DIRECTOR: **Weixin Zhuang**

Friday, April 2, 7pm ET

Waste Is My Passion, DIRECTOR: **Yuby Hernandez**
Mountain's Heart, DIRECTOR: **Hansen Lin**
Into the Black and Blue Forest, DIRECTOR: **Oxana Onipko**
Rebels Against Hunger, DIRECTOR: **Reed Smith**

★Showcase Spotlight Saturday, April 3, 10am ET

Wata Dawtas, DIRECTOR: **Veronique Engel**
Sisters of Summit, DIRECTOR: **Catherine Finsness**
Sweet Summer Tangelos, DIRECTOR: **Keliang Li**
Three Threads, DIRECTOR: **Rohan Rao**

Saturday April 3, 7pm ET

The Ballad of Tombstone, AZ, DIRECTOR: **Adam Evans**
Dancing Inward, DIRECTOR: **Shuming Zhang**
Busker, DIRECTOR: **Zoey Zhang**



Wata Dawtas

★ **SHOWCASE SPOTLIGHT** | LENGTH: 75 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Veronique Engel** (Fulbright Scholarship, Prins Bernhard Cultuurfonds, VandenEnde Foundation, SocDoc Thesis Grant, SVA Alumni Award)

Ketana (10), relentlessly bullied because of a physical disability and devastated by the absence of her mother, longs for love and acceptance. Jamaica's first five-band synchronized swimming team is her salvation. High atop the hills of picturesque Port Antonio, led by their Olympic gold-winning Russian coach Olga, the young Jamaican girls swim for stakes higher than medals—their lives. veronique.engel@hotmail.com



Waste Is My Passion

LENGTH: 35 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Yuby Hernandez** (AAUW, SocDoc Department Scholarship, Wellesley College Graduate Fellowship)

Four New Yorkers search through the trash for salvageable food, clothes and collectibles. Anna, an affluent Upper-West-Sider, dreams, works and lives waste, while posting it all on Instagram. Lovely young couple Maggie and Michael, both teachers, dive for food to supplement their income. And city planner Ursula looks for statistical trends as she researches reducing the city's waste. Follow their journeys as they minimize waste and build community in our over-consumptive society. yhernandez@mfasocdoc.com



The Ballad of Tombstone, AZ

LENGTH: 18 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Adam Evans** (SocDoc Thesis Grant)

Welcome to the O.K. Corral—a Wild West historical reenactment theater in Tombstone, Arizona, where a troupe of actors replay the same day in 1881 over and over again. In looking at the past through the lens of the so-called "Town Too Tough To Die," the film explores the power of stories and perils of nostalgia. adamevansfilm.com | aevans@mfasocdoc.com



Sweet Summer Tangelos

★ **SHOWCASE SPOTLIGHT** | LENGTH: 75 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Keliang Li** (SocDoc Thesis Grant, FreshPitch People's Choice Award & Gold Award, CNEX Chinese Documentary Forum Doc Edge Award, Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival Top 10 pitches, FIRST Documentary Lab, New Zealand Doc Edge Pitch, Westlake International Documentary Festival Pitching Session)

22-year-old filmmaker Keliang returned home from New York only to find that her mother had been fighting cancer for the past year and only had 20 days left. With her camera, Keliang saved every second left with her mother, and the never-ending trauma, healing and growth she had to take along with it. kli@mfasocdoc.com



Sisters of Summit

★ **SHOWCASE SPOTLIGHT** | LENGTH: 65 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Catherine Finsness** (SocDoc Thesis Grant)

In the small town of Summit, New Jersey, there sits a cloistered monastery where a community of nuns have vowed to live a life of poverty, chastity and obedience. They are not what you might expect—many of them are college-educated Millennials. This film explores the idea of holiness through coexisting contrasts and contradictions: the sacred and the mundane, the sorrow and joy, the repetitiveness and the mystery of monastic life as "brides of Christ." cfinsness.com | cfinsness@sva.edu



Mountain's Heart

LENGTH: 70 minutes

DIRECTOR: **Hansen Lin** (SocDoc Thesis Grant, SVA Alumni Award, DocuMart Pitch Semifinalist, Guangzhou Int'l Documentary Festival)

Hidden away in the mountains of China, Zhaowei Xu, a Hope Primary School teacher, becomes a soccer coach to a group of left-behind children living without their parents and who lack the financial and educational support necessary for advancement. An important regional soccer match reflects their collective struggle and confusion in seeking a way out of the rural mountainous existence into which they were born. veritiestudio95@gmail.com



Into the Black and Blue Forest

LENGTH: 50 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Oxana Onipko** (SocDoc Thesis Grant, SVA Alumni Award)

An immersive artistic and emotional journey into the horror story that is domestic violence in Russia. Part fact-finding, part advocacy and part Gonzo journalism, filmmaker and photographer Oxana Onipko follows the thread of proposed legislation that would provide the first-ever legal protections for battered and abused women in Russia. Onipko meets with domestic violence victims who should have been protected but were not. Using their stories, she creates an evocative work that underscores the bravery of these women in the face of relentless hostility. oonipko@mfasocdoc.com



Three Threads

★ **SHOWCASE SPOTLIGHT** | LENGTH: 25 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Rohan Rao** (SocDoc Thesis Grant)

The Rann is a salt desert that stretches for miles across west Gujarat, India. It is here that Pachan Siju, a traditional handloom artisan, lives and is determined to add his own color to the white landscape through his clothing brand, Three Threads. Being a *Dalit* and deemed untouchable by the higher caste communities, he cannot afford local exhibitions, and dreams of finding funding opportunity in the U.S. This film weaves a story of the hopes and aspirations of an extraordinary artist. rrao@mfasocdoc.com



Dancing Inward

LENGTH: 44 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Shuming Zhang** (SVA Alumni Award)

Garrison and Sabrina have each spent years in a wheelchair; losing the use of their legs has made life difficult. They decide to participate in a wheelchair dance class taught by a great dancer and choreographer Heidi Latsky. After only 13 days of rehearsal, they perform for an audience. How will they face this new challenge with strict teachers and discerning audiences? And will they become professional disabled dancers as their teacher hopes? shumingzhang.com | subwalterz@gmail.com



Busker

LENGTH: 40 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Zooey Zhang** (SVA Alumni Award, DOC NYC)

What is the fascination with busking on the streets of the Big Apple? Three street musicians share what draws them to it: Robert, a talented European songwriter who is deaf in one ear; Marley, a Dominican girl who wants to be an internationally known singer and performs in the subway after the death of her parents; and Ajilo, an African saxophonist whose life changed when a car accident inspired him to bring happiness to others every day. zozeyzhang.com | yzhang@mfasocdoc.com



Rebels Against Hunger

LENGTH: 27 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Reed Smith**

While many people know that food can be healthy, many people do not think healthy food can also be delicious. Rebel Ventures is a non-profit organization working to make food be both healthy and delicious for people in Philadelphia. William Chaney and his coworkers at Rebel Ventures explain what they do and why they do it, creating a powerful portrait of a community where unhealthy food seems like the only option. rsmith32@sva.edu



The Last Cut

LENGTH: 15 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Ben Wang** (SocDoc Thesis Grant)

The oldest barbershop in Manhattan's Chinatown is coming to its close. The barbers, all immigrants, have to face their retirement and adapt to this new stage of life. bwang@mfasocdoc.com



Tie Up

LENGTH: 18 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Weixin Zhuang**

An immersive portrait of Dia Dynasty, an Asian dominatrix in New York City. The film explores her relationships with her family and clients and her unique perspective on the bonds between spirituality and sexuality. weixinzwitzki.com | weixinzfilm@gmail.com



Weixin Zhuang, Keliang Li and Shiqin Gao in a camera exercise.

Photo by Erik Spink.

ADDITIONAL FILMS

(WILL NOT BE SCREENED)



The Slipper Room

LENGTH: 30 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Mark Crowell**

A glimpse inside the Lower East Side's famous burlesque nightclub, The Slipper Room. During the day, the owners James and Camille are a typical couple working day jobs and raising two kids. At night, they transform into a pair of bawdy vaudeville characters who introduce comedic and acrobatic acts to the stage. Over twenty years of shows, we see the history of a club where many nightlife performers got their start in a uniquely New York story.

mcrowell@sva.edu

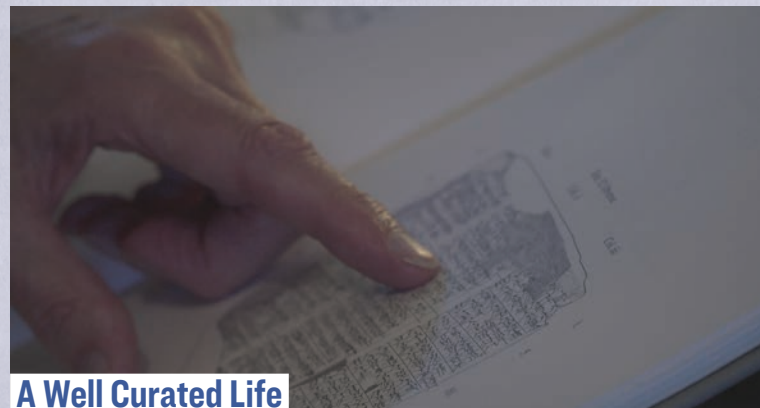


Middle of Nothingness

LENGTH: 35 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Shiqin Gao**

In New York City, the Either are emerging. A musical trio from China, their sound combines classic Chinese instruments with Western rock. But breaking hundreds of years of tradition comes at the cost of criticism from all sides. Pressure mounts and the band struggles against their own self-doubt. While they are seeking opportunity in New York, the coronavirus strikes, significantly hampering their progress. In this uncertain, chaotic time, can the Either and their experimental style survive?

sgao@mfasocdoc.com



A Well Curated Life

LENGTH: 15 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Jamie Deradorian-Delia** (SocDoc Thesis Grant)

Dr. Ira Spar, a professor and retired Metropolitan Museum of Art Assyriologist who specializes in the Babylonian language, waxes poetic about the cyclical nature of ancient and personal history.

jamiederadoriandelia.com | jamiederadorian1@gmail.com



Gallatea: A Dream of His Muse

LENGTH: 28 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Ao Li**

A portrait of production designer Tim Yip.



Hybrid

LENGTH: 10 minutes
DIRECTOR: **Cheng Yang**

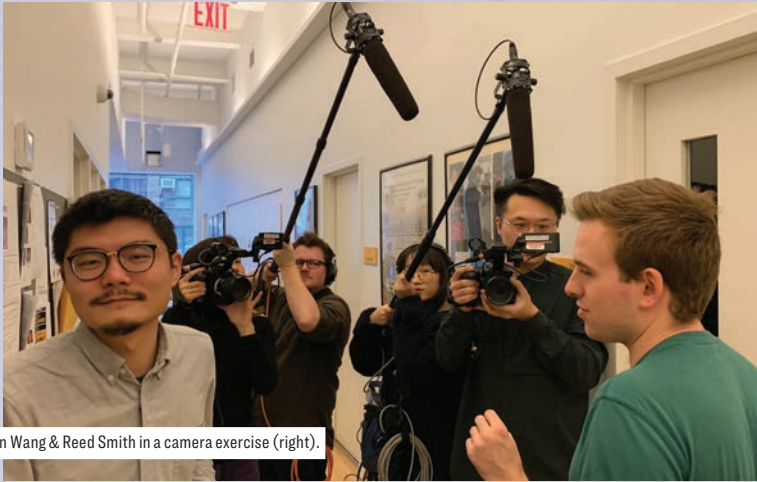
Brooklyn-based artist Ken Butler has been making hybrid instruments for more than 20 years. Made of repurposed objects found mostly on the street, Ken also plays all the instruments himself. It took him a long way to get here since he was a visual artist in the 1980s. And now he has some new ideas.

cyang@mfasocdoc.com



Veronique Engel filming in Jamaica (top) and Cat Finsness and Rohan Rao in a lighting workshop (bottom).

Photos by Ana Montgomery Neutze (top) and Hansen Lin (bottom)



Photos by Yuby Hernandez (left) and Weixin Zhuang (right).

Yuby Hernandez interviews Rohan Rao in class (left) and Shuming (Walter) Zhang, Ao (Leo) Li, Adam Evans, Keliang Li, Ben Wang & Reed Smith in a camera exercise (right).

FACULTY

Maro Chermayeff, exec. producer/director, *Atlanta’s Missing and Murdered: The Lost Children*; producer/director, *Half the Sky: Turning Oppression into Opportunity for Women Worldwide*
Julie Anderson, producer, “Vick,” *30 for 30*
Axel Baumann, cinematographer, *Pavarotti*
Alan Berliner, director, *Letter to the Editor*
Mira Chang, producer, *A Path Appears*
Lori Cheatle, producer, *Matangi/Maya/M.I.A.*
Peter Chelkowski, director/cinematographer, *Harpooned*
Ann Collins, editor, *Joan Didion: The Center Will Not Hold*
Deborah Dickson, director, *The Lost Bird Project*
Bob Eisenhardt, editor, *Free Solo*
Michael Epstein, director, *John & Yoko: Above Us Only Sky*
Micah Fink, director, *Mann v. Ford*

Leslie Asako Gladsjo, director, *Black America Since MLK: And Still I Rise*
Penelope Falk, editor, *Joan Rivers: A Piece of Work*
Kristian Gonzales, editor, technical consultant
Richard Hankin, editor, *Capturing the Friedmans*
Judith Helfand, director/producer, *Cooked: Survival by Zip Code*
Tom Hurwitz, ASC, cinematographer, *Queen of Versailles*
Amitabh Joshi, director, *Tashi’s Turbine*
Ross Kauffman, director, *Born into Brothels*
Sabine Krayenbühl, editor, *My Architect*
Beth Levison, producer, *Made in Boise*
Christa Majoras, editor, technical consultant
Mark Mandler, production sound, *Reconstruction: America after the Civil War*
Kat Patterson, cinematographer, *12th and Delaware*

Samuel D. Pollard, director, *MLK/FBI*
Thom Powers, artistic director, DOC NYC
Robert Richman, cinematographer, *Paradise Lost* trilogy
Jerry Risius, cinematographer, *Parts Unknown: Anthony Bourdain*
Amy Schewel, archival producer, *Atlanta’s Missing and Murdered*
E. Donna Shepherd, editor, *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present*
Toby Shimin, editor, *Ernie & Joe*
Karen K. H. Sim, editor, *Who Killed Garrett Phillips?*
Erik Spink, producer, *Tashi’s Turbine*
J.T. Takagi, sound recordist, *Strong Island*
Ana Veselic, editor, *Kehinde Wiley: An Economy of Grace*
Rose Vincelli Gustine, film strategy consultant
Farihah Zaman, director, *Remote Area Medical*

STAFF

Maro Chermayeff, founder and chair
Rose Vincelli Gustine, director of operations
Timothy Doyle, assistant to the chair
Kristian Gonzales, senior systems administrator
Christa Majoras, senior systems administrator
Joseph Eisenstein, video production manager

SVA ADMINISTRATION

David Rhodes, president
Anthony P. Rhodes, executive vice president
Christopher J. Cyphers, Ph.D., provost
Steven Heller, co-chair, MFA Design; co-founder, MFA SocDoc Department

THANK YOU!

Caroline Berler, editor, Thesis Showcase sizzle reel (2017 MFA SocDoc)
Group 9 & Group 11
Visual Arts Press
SVA Galleries

Unless noted, all photos courtesy of the directors.

Dank Je Спасибо जी शुक्रिया

Thank you Gracias 谢谢 ඔබටතෑ

Kiitos 고맙습니다 اركش Ngā mihi

多謝 Twalumba منونمم

... to all the SocDoc faculty, guest lecturers, alumni and staff; our family and friends; and the whole SVA community for your thoughtful insights, your care, attention and unique perspective throughout the process of making these films.

DEPARTMENT CONTACT INFORMATION

mfasocdoc.sva.edu | mfasocdoc@sva.edu
212.592.2919



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Front cover: *Wata Dawtas*
Back cover: *Three Threads*



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